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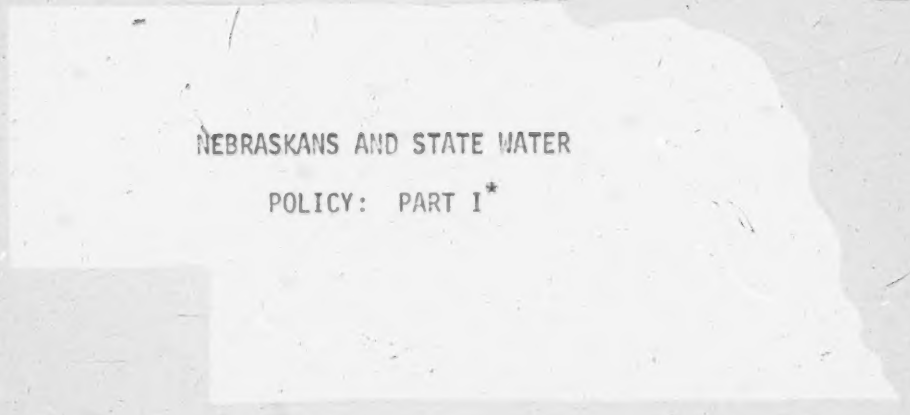

NEBRASKANS AND STATE WATER POLICY: PART I*

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NEBRASKA ANNUAL SOCIAL INDICATORS SURVEY

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NEBRASKANS AND STATE WATER POLICY: PART I*

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Price: $ .50

The Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey

Lynn K. White: 1979 Study Director

The findings in this report are based on data collected in the third Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS). This survey is part of an on-going study of the quality of life in Nebraska conducted by the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

In 1979 a representative sample of 1882 Nebraskans eighteen years of age or older living in households was interviewed by telephone. The respondents to the 1979 survey are part of a panel originally selected and interviewed in 1977 and 1978. They will be re-interviewed every two years in order to provide information on changing quality of life. The interviews averaged approximately 40 minutes and included questions about environment, health, crime, political attitudes, occupation, education, family life and other matters reflecting the quality of life experienced in the state. For the entire sample, 95 out of 100 times the percentages computed from the items asked on the survey are likely to be accurate to within plus or minus 2.3 percent of the figure that would have been obtained if each adult in Nebraska had been surveyed. This is an estimate of maximum error and for most items the percentages are likely to be even more accurate.

The data gathered by NASIS are used by a wide variety of State and local government agencies for policy and program planning and by faculty and students at the University of Nebraska and other colleges for research. No information identifying any respondent is released to any users and the strict confidentiality of individual respondents is rigidly enforced. While the final responsibility for the organization and structure of the survey and for reports produced under its name rests with the Bureau of Sociological Research, public agencies and University departments play an integral part in planning the survey through an Advisory Committee. Public organizations interested in membership on the Advisory Committee should contact the NASIS Study Director.

Funding for NASIS comes from the University of Nebraska, The Bureau of Sociological Research, and State and local agencies which buy items and data analysis from the survey.

The NASIS surveys are repeated each year to measure changes in the quality of life in Nebraska. While there is a core of questions which is included every year, each survey has a large component of unique items which address specific topical issues. Plans for future years include interviewing a new sample of Nebraskans in 1980 as well as continuing to re-interview the 1977 panel every two years to assess changes in their lives. Additional detail on the NASIS surveys regarding use of the survey data or cost of purchasing items on future surveys can be obtained by contacting Lynn K. White, NASIS Study Director, at the Bureau of Sociological Research or by sending for a copy of the 1980 NASIS Prospectus.

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One of the major issues facing Nebraskans is what to do about potential water shortages. Formulating a statewide water policy has been a political football in the state legislature and executive branch for years. State action in the area has been relatively weak; the state has generally relied on self-regulation by irrigators and other water users within small areas of the state. In 1959 Groundwater Conservation Districts were formed; in 1969 a bill authorizing Natural Resource Districts (NRD's) was passed. These organizations were established in the geographical areas of river basins to provide some regulatory mechanism at the substate level. The NRD's, however, have not acted vigorously to regulate water use, although groundwater level declines have prompted some localized moves toward greater restrictions on wells.

As in many other policy areas, water policy is characterized by strong advocacy on the part of a few people who are vitally affected by government action in that area, but by little representation of the views of the public at large, those not so immediately and directly affected. Consequently, policy often tends to be shaped by the people who are potentially those to be regulated, even though the policy will affect all of us. Adequate supplies of water are obviously essential in order to live comfortably in the city or on the farm, to keep our factories and businesses running, as well as for agricultural use.

Because public opinion on this vital policy area is virtually unknown, we set out to ask Nebraskans about their perception whether water shortage was a potential problem; second, whether they believed that control of water use is neccesary; and third, what steps they believed necessary to regulate water use. We dealt with several forms of water use, including agricultural, business, industrial, and household use. In this first report, we present the results of our survey about awareness of water shortages and about views toward regulating water for business and household use. In our next report, we discuss the views of Nebraskans on regulation of water for agricultural use.

The information for our study was taken from a statewide sample of over 1800 Nebraskans done by the Bureau of Sociological Research in February and March, 1979. A randomly selected half of the sample (N=938) were asked questions pertaining to water policy. We first asked this group if they believe that Nebraska has a water shortage today. Exactly one-quarter of the sample did so believe, while three-quarters believed we did not have a shortage today. However, 59 percent of this latter group thought that we would have a shortage by the year 2000. Thus, over two-thirds of Nebraskans (69%) believe that a water shortage is a reality--either now or in the near future.

We then asked our sample about different alternatives in dealing with the water scarcity issue. Three questions were asked concerning regulation of water for industrial and household use, and several more relating to agricultural use (to be reported next week). We found that a majority of Nebraskans do favor some regulation of water for both industrial and business use and private household use. Over three-quarters believe that the amount of water used by businesses and industries should be regulated in some way, and a slight majority (53%) believe that water used in private households should be regulated. Thus, most Nebraskans are willing to face up to the reality of water shortages by regulating its use.

What means of regulation or limitation of water use are favored by Nebraskans? There are at least two basic modes of regulation of a resource such as water. One is to increase its price and thereby at a certain point decrease consumption. This could be done through taxation, by simply allowing the cost to go up as demand outstrips supply, or by setting an artificially high price to discourage excess consumption. The other way is to control water use directly by limiting its supply (such as in rationing) or requiring more efficient use of the resource through one means or another (for example, one might require water saving toilets, just as in the case of oil where government has required higher standards of fuel efficiency in cars). In the first means of regulation through higher prices,

government is not so directly involved in private behavior; in the second alternative, controlling use directly, government is more involved in regulating what can and cannot be done. Faced with this sort of choice--higher prices or more government regulation--which do Nebraskans prefer?

In responding to our alternatives, Nebraskans overwhelmingly favor more direct government regulation of water use compared to higher prices. As Table 1 indicates, around three-quarters of Nebraskans favor requiring water conservation equipment and limiting the use of water for "non-necessary" purposes. While over 60 percent favor limiting the amount business and industry can use, only a quarter favor dealing with the water shortage problem by increasing the price of water. Less than one quarter favor what is probably the most extreme solution--encouraging people to move away from water-short areas. Thus, faced with some form of regulation or control to conserve scarce water, Nebraskans favor government regulation rather than higher prices.

Which Nebraskans favor regulation of water for industrial and household uses? Table 2 indicates that there are not many differences among subgroups of Nebraskans. For example, Republicans and Democrats share about the same views on these issues, though Independents are slightly more likely to favor regulation. Males and females do not differ in their attitudes toward regulation, but younger people are slightly more likely to favor regulation than middle-aged and older people (though the difference with regard to household use is very slight). Those from Southeast Nebraska and the Panhandle are most likely to favor regulation of industrial and household water use, while those from the Omaha area and Northern Nebraska are least likely to favor regulation. Differences among education groups are not large, though those with some college are more likely to favor regulation than those with high school education or less. Finally, those who practice another form of conservation--that of energy--are no more likely than other Nebraskans

to favor regulation.* Farmers are slightly less likely than others to favor regulation for household use, but are little different from their city counterparts in favoring regulation for business and industrial use. In that area, rural nonfarm people are most supportive.

In sum, most Nebraskans do see water shortages as a current or potential reality in this state. Overwhelmingly they support regulation of water use by business and industry and a slight majority favor regulation of water use by private households. When faced with alternative plans for regulation, including rationing, mandatory installation of water-saving devices, encouraging movement away from water short areas and higher prices through taxation or other means of increasing the cost of water, Nebraskans overwhelmingly favor government regulation--including rationing to business and industry and mandatory water-saving equipment--rather than higher prices or encouraging people to leave water short areas.

Whether these sentiments are deeply felt is impossible to know. When the state government becomes more serious in dealing with the water policy issue and specific proposals are put forward, undoubtedly each group will be all in favor of regulation--for someone else. Still, these opinions lead one to suspect that most Nebraskans would support policies seeking to deal forthrightly with the possibility of a future water shortage. Of course, one major component of any water policy in Nebraska is what to do about agricultural uses of water. It is public opinion on that topic which we will address in our next report.

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*Questions were asked to ascertain the number of fuel-saving devices individuals used in their homes such as installing storm windows, weather stripping, turning their furnaces down to 68, insulating, and so forth. Each individual was scored from 0 to 8 depending on how many energy-saving actions they have taken within the last two years, and then the sample was grouped into high, medium, and low categories on this factor.

TABLE 1.

ATTITUDES TOWARD WATER POLICY*

	Yes	No	
Is there a water shortage today?	25%	75%	
If no: Will there be one by 2000?	59	41	
Should we regulate water for industrial use?	76	24	
Should we regulate water used by private citizens?	53	47	
Methods of Conserving	**Yes**	**No**	**D.K.**
Require water conservation equipment	72%	21%	7%
Limit use for non-necessary purposes	70	23	7
Limit amount on industry	62	22	16
Increase price for household and industries	23	68	9
Encourage people to move away from water short areas	20	67	13

*Verbatim Questions:

Do you believe that the amount of water used by factories and business should be regulated?

Do you believe that water for private use by people living in towns and cities should be regulated?

If water use by private citizens and industries in towns and cities is to be regulated, do you favor or oppose each of the following ways to regulate?
Require equipment that reduces the use of water, such as water-saving toilets and showers;
Limit use for non-necessary things such as watering lawns and automatic dishwashers;
Limit the amount of water an industry can use;
Increase the price of water to private households and industries;
Encourage people to move away from water short areas.

TABLE 2.

ATTITUDES OF SUBGROUPS OF NEBRASKANS ON REGULATORY ISSUES

	Regulate Factory/ Business Use % Yes	Regulate Private Household Use % Yes
Age		
18 - 35	79	55
36 - 59	74	51
60 +	73	53
Sex		
Female	77	55
Male	73	52
Region		
Panhandle	76	57
Southwest	80	55
South Central	75	56
North	74	52
Omaha Area	71	49
Southeast	81	58
Type of Community		
Lincoln or Omaha	75	52
2,500 to 50,000	74	57
Rural non-farm	81	56
Rural farm	73	50
Education		
Less than high school graduate	72	53
High school graduate	73	51
13 - 15 years	80	57
16 + years	79	56
Voted in Past Two Years		
Yes	75	53
No	76	55
Political Party Preference		
Republican	73	51
Democrat	75	53
Independent	79	59
Practice Home Energy Conservation		
Low	73	53
Medium	76	52
High	77	55

List of reports already released using data gathered in the 1979 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey. These may be purchased at the indicated price from the Bureau of Sociological Research of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Report Number	Title
1	Designs, Procedures, Instruments, and Forms for the 1979 NASIS. Lynn K. White. Price: $7.50.
2	Taxes: Are They Fair? Susan Welch and Alan Booth. Price: $ .50.
3	Nebraska's Children -- Learning to Work. Lynn K. White and David B. Brinkerhoff. Price: $ .75.
4	Nebraskans' Evaluation of Their State Government. Alan Booth and Susan Welch. Price: $ .50.